

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. An instant messaging system comprising: an electronic assistant to handle instant
2 messages sent from a first user to an instant message program of a second user when the
3 second user is away or offline, wherein the assistant:
4 receives a first instant message from the first user;
5 in response to the first instant message, sends the first user an instant
6 message that indicates that the second user is away or offline;
7 receives a second instant message from the first user, wherein the second
8 instant message contains a request that the electronic assistant take an action related to
9 the away or offline status of the second user; and
10 in response to the request, takes the requested action.

1 2. The system of claim 1 wherein:
2 the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user
3 for delivery to the second user;
4 the assistant, to take the requested action, takes the message from the first user for
5 delivery to the second user; and
6 the assistant forwards the message to the second user.

7 3. The system of claim 1 wherein:
8 the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the
9 away or offline status of the second user; and
10 the assistant, to take the requested action, sends the first user an instant message
11 containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

12 4. The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant accesses stored information about recent
13 history of the away and/or offline status of the second user.

1 5. The system of claim 4 wherein:
2 the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the

3 away or offline status of the second user;

4 the assistant, to take the requested action, sends the first user an instant message
5 containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

6 the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of
7 the second user is based, at least in part, on the stored information about recent history of
8 the away and/or offline status of the second user.

1 6. The system of claim 4 wherein:

2 the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user
3 for delivery to the second user;

4 the assistant, to take the requested action, takes the message from the first user for
5 delivery to the second user;

6 the assistant forwards the message to the second user; and

7 the message is forwarded based, at least in part, on the stored information about
8 recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user.

1 7. The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant accesses stored calendar information for the
2 second user.

1 8. The system of claim 7 wherein:

2 the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the
3 away or offline status of the second user;

4 the assistant, to take the requested action, sends the first user an instant message
5 containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

6 the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of
7 the second user is based, at least in part, on the stored calendar information.

1 9. The system of claim 7 wherein:

2 the requested action includes having the assistant taking a message from the first user
3 for delivery to the second user;

4 the assistant, to take the requested action, takes the message from the first user for
5 delivery to the second user;

6 the assistant forwards the message to the second user; and
7 the message is forwarded based, at least in part, on the stored calendar information.

1 10. The system of claim 1 wherein the assistant accesses stored information about other ways
2 of contacting the second user.

1 11. The system of claim 10 wherein:
2 the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the
3 away or offline status of the second user;
4 the assistant, to take the requested action, sends the first user an instant message
5 containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and
6 the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of
7 the second user is based, at least in part on the stored information about other ways of
8 contacting the second user.

1 12. The system of claim 10 wherein:
2 the requested action includes having the assistant take a message from the first user
3 for delivery to the second user;
4 the assistant, to take the requested action, takes the message from the first user for
5 delivery to the second user;
6 the assistant forwards the message to the second user; and
7 the message is forwarded based, at least in part, on the stored information about other
8 ways of contacting the second user.

1 13. The system of claim 1 wherein:
2 the requested action includes providing the first user with information related to the
3 away or offline status of the second user;
4 the assistant, to take the requested action, sends the first user an instant message
5 containing information related to the away or offline status of the second user; and
6 the information provided to the first user that relates to the away or offline status of
7 the second user is based, at least in part, on a trust level for the first user.

1 14. An electronic assistant to handle instant messages sent from a first user to an instant
2 message program of a second user when the second user is away or offline, the assistant
3 comprising:

4 a natural language interface component to perform processing on an instant
5 message to determine if the instant message is requesting that the electronic assistant take
6 an action related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

7 a response component to determine and send a response to an instant message
8 requesting that the electronic assistant take an action related to the away or offline status
9 of the second user, wherein the response is related to the requested action.

1 15. The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

2 the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or
3 offline status of the second user;

4 the response component determines and sends a response that includes information
5 related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

6 the response component accesses stored information about recent history of the away
7 and/or offline status of the second user to determine the response that includes
8 information related to the away or offline status of the second user.

1 16. The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

2 the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or
3 offline status of the second user;

4 the response component determines and sends a response that includes information
5 related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

6 the response component accesses stored calendar information for the second user to
7 determine the response that includes information related to the away or offline status of
8 the second user.

1 17. The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

2 the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or
3 offline status of the second user;

4 the response component determines and sends a response that includes information

5 related to the away or offline status of the second user; and
6 the response component accesses stored information about other ways of contacting
7 the second user to determine the response that includes information related to the away or
8 offline status of the second user.

1 18. The assistant of claim 14 wherein:

2 the action includes providing the first user with information related to the away or
3 offline status of the second user;

4 the response component determines and sends a response that includes information
5 related to the away or offline status of the second user; and

6 the response that includes information related to the away or offline status of the
7 second user is based, at least in part, on a trust level for the first user.

1 19. The assistant of claim 14 wherein the action includes taking a message from the first user
2 for delivery to the second user and the assistant further comprises a message component
3 to forward a message left by the first user for delivery to the second user according to a
4 determination of when and to where the message should be forwarded for the second user
5 to receive the message.

1 20. The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component accesses stored information
2 about recent history of the away and/or offline status of the second user to determine
3 when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second
4 user to receive the message.

1 21. The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component accesses stored calendar
2 information for the second user to determine when and to where the message left by the
3 first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the message.

1 22. The assistant of claim 19 wherein the message component accesses stored information
2 about other ways of contacting the second user to determine when and to where the
3 message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second user to receive the
4 message.

1 23. A method of handling instant messages sent to an away or offline user, the method
2 comprising:
3 receiving instant messages sent to the away or offline user from a first user;
4 in response to at least one of the instant messages requesting information related to
5 the away or offline status of the away or offline user, providing, to the first user,
6 information related to the away or offline status of the away or offline user;
7 receiving a message left by the first user for delivery to the away or offline user;
8 determining when and to where the message left by the first user should be forwarded
9 for the second user to receive the message; and
10 forwarding the message according to the determination of when and to where the
11 message should be forwarded.

1 24. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about recent
2 history of the away and/or offline status of the away or offline user to determine the
3 information, to be provided to the first user, that relates to the away or offline status of
4 the away or offline user.

1 25. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored calendar information for the
2 away or offline user to determine the information, to be provided to the first user, that
3 relates to the away or offline status of the away or offline user.

1 26. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about other
2 ways of contacting the away or offline user to determine the information, to be provided
3 to the first user, that relates to the away or offline status of the away or offline user.

1 27. The method of claim 23 further comprising determining the information, to be provided
2 to the first user, that relates to the away or offline status of the away or offline user based,
3 at least in part, on a trust level for the first user.

1 28. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about recent
2 history of away and/or offline status of the away or offline user to determine when and to

3 where the message left by the first user should be forwarded for the second away or
4 offline user to receive the message.

1 29. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored calendar information for the
2 away or offline user to determine when and to where the message left by the first user
3 should be forwarded for the away or offline user to receive the message.

1 30. The method of claim 23 further comprising accessing stored information about other
2 ways of contacting the away or offline user to determine when and to where the message
3 left by the first user should be forwarded for the away or offline user to receive the
4 message.